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“New Normal” No More: Democratic Backsliding in Singapore After 2015

Introduction

“Is there evidence of a global democratic recession? The answer is unfortunately, yes.”¹ The ominous warning has spurred a significant volume of scholarship investigating democratic backsliding.² Yet, within the field of Comparative Politics, scholars have almost exclusively focused on backsliding in democracies. Scant attention has been paid to democratic backsliding in hybrid regimes. If hybrid regimes are not static, but can move forward or backwards along the spectrum of autocracy and liberalization, then it is crucial to investigate democratic backsliding in hybrid regimes as much as their trajectories towards liberalization. Democratic backsliding in hybrid regimes, which can be defined as an extension of executive powers – formal or informal – and the constricting of political space for non-state actors, whether members of the opposition or civil society, needs to be interrogated, and its causes, understood.³

This article investigates the competitive authoritarian regime of Singapore and the quality of democracy in the city-state since the year 2011. 2011 is chosen as a starting point because it was the year in which the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) suffered its worst ever electoral performance, and subsequently, adopted a softer tone and promised an expansion of the political space. Many analysts expected the PAP to pursue a continued path of liberalization after 2011. Yet, after the subsequent GE in 2015, in which the PAP attained a much higher share of the votes in a resounding victory, there is an apparent democratic backsliding. Academics have been publicly censured by state leaders, legislation has been passed to strengthen the coercive capacity

of the state, and dissenters have faced draconian measures. Why did the PAP not continue on its path of liberalization, but instead, reverted back to its more familiar authoritarian stratagem? More importantly, *why was it able to do so?* This paper makes the following claims. I contend that the PAP was able to revert back to its more familiar authoritarian past because of two reasons: 1) there is an absence of genuine reformers within the party to push through the agenda of democratization; and 2) there is a lack of a strong and coherent opposition which has enough credibility with the voters to cause a serious dent in the PAP's electoral success. Comparisons with Malaysia and the recent success of the opposition in a similar political system will be made in order to understand Singapore's political circumstances better.

This paper is focused on the conditions which make it easy for democratic backsliding to occur in Singapore, and not the causes of backsliding per se. Indeed, it would not be that difficult to imagine why the PAP would institute a series of measures which can be viewed as more authoritarian since 2015. The party most definitely would have incentives to enact such pieces of legislation. The imperatives of leadership transition – as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his team are preparing to hand over the reins of leadership to a team of successors led by Heng Swee Keat and Chan Chun Sing –, has probably given the ruling party a strong motivation to tighten the ship, since the new leadership has not attained the level of credibility and popularity with the masses as Lee and his team have. The Malaysian election in 2018, which unseated the then-ruling *Barisan Nasional*, has possibly further raised anxieties on the part of the PAP, as it showed the real possibility of a ruling party with vast institutional control being rejected by the population. Malaysia's election generated some excitement amongst the pro-opposition support in Singapore, with various online media outlets asking if the results could be replicated in neighbouring Singapore, in the immediate aftermath.⁴ As such, it would not be surprising if the PAP greeted the

results with much wariness. The PAP's robust showing in the 2015 elections had endowed it with political capital to push through the associated reforms. Yet, beyond this, this paper does not delve into the motivations for these reforms, but rather, the conditions which make them possible. As long as the factors are present, they make backsliding quite simple to execute.

The focus of this essay would be other conditions which are more pertinent to these regimes. These conditions in hybrid regimes makes gains from temporary liberalization transient. Without internal reformers and external pressure, temporary gains in civil liberties and the expansion of political space can be quickly reversed. Democratic backsliding since 2015 is not caused by these factors, but their absence helps in ensuring it. The difference in approaches by the PAP government post-2011 and post-2015 could be attributed to the simple fact that it garnered massive political capital (with its close to 70% share of the votes) in 2015, and hence is more able to spend the capital through the passage of draconian laws and measures, even the unpopular ones. The conditions which enable the PAP to switch courses so significantly, will be the focus of this essay. It is useful to highlight that backsliding does not just occur in countries which have transitioned to democracies. Backsliding can also happen in countries which have always been authoritarian; after all, it is possible to be *more* authoritarian or *less* authoritarian, just as it is possible to be *more* democratic or *less* democratic.

Democratic Backsliding: Understanding the Concept

As mentioned earlier, democratic backsliding involves an overreach of the powers of the executive, a further stifling of oppositional forces, and various strategies employed to curb the participation of ordinary citizens in the democratic process.⁵ Bermeo highlights executive aggrandizement as an important facet of backsliding, whereby “elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces

to challenge executive preferences”, which is often done through legal means.⁶ Gandhi supports this understanding of backsliding, declaring that it can occur when elites assert “executive power prerogatives” and rely “on partisan allies within the legislature” to pass legislation which weaken the opposition, limit press freedom, and exclude voters.⁷

While instances of full-fledged democracies becoming autocracies are rare, they do happen.⁸ What is more common, however, is the decline in quality of democracy in general, be it in liberal democracies (although most times, this decay does not lead them to becoming autocracies), or in authoritarian regimes themselves. Countries like Turkey, which can scarcely be considered liberal democracies in the first place, have further regressed toward more authoritarianism.⁹ Under President Erdogan, punitive action has been taken against journalists, elections have been made less fair, and civil liberties have been violated.¹⁰ These actions represented a decay in democratic institutions and values. Crucially, it must be noted that backsliding entails both formal institutions and informal norms, and can take the form of many manoeuvres.¹¹

What then, are the causes of democratic backsliding? Some authors have suggested that crises – whether unfavourable economic conditions or external military threats – may precipitate reversal toward authoritarianism. When countries face external military threats, nationalistic sentiments are rife amongst the general public, who demand strong reactions from the state. In the process of displaying aggression, the state is given more leeway to suspend democratic liberties and/or procedures, as the electorate’s focus is directed outwards.¹² Indeed, it is not uncommon for states to capitalize on patriotism to expand their powers and stifle the opposition. Other scholars have argued for the role of economic crises in causing democratic backsliding. Citizens who are suffering from the devastating consequences of economic catastrophes are more willing to tolerate authoritarian leaders who institute tough measures – which they deem necessary – to repair the

economy.¹³ While many of them may be comfortable with short-term authoritarian measures in the interim to restore the economy to its optimal capacity, what often ends up occurring is authoritarian consolidation in the medium to long-run. While the political economy of crises are indeed instructive in comprehending democratic backsliding in general, the analysis is not entirely relevant to the Singapore case: the regression toward more authoritarianism came in spite of an absence of either an economic or a military crisis.

Levitsky and Way caution against the pessimism on the fate and future of democracies.¹⁴ They argue that the idea that there is a global democratic recession is a “myth”, and widespread backsliding is an “illusion”. This is because many authoritarian breakdowns were mistakenly assumed to be beginnings of a democratic transition, when in actuality, they were caused by moments of “extraordinary incumbent weakness”.¹⁵ No doubt, there is more than a grain of truth in their analysis; however, Levitsky and Way seem to downplay the backsliding of non-democratic regimes. In a similar vein, Luhrmann and Lindberg argue that the term autocratization is more apt than democratic backsliding, since the latter can only occur in democracies, since the term backsliding implies “an involuntary reversal back to historical precedents”.¹⁶ For them, democratic backsliding represents a movement from more to less democracy; democratic breakdown means a change in regime type from democracy to authoritarianism; while autocratic consolidation describes moving from less to more authoritarianism. All three would constitute autocratization.¹⁷ However, Waldner and Lust disagree and posit that backsliding “entails a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime.”¹⁸ In democratic regimes, it is a decline in the quality of democracy; in autocracies, it is a decline in democratic qualities of governance.” I concur with them, and not Luhrmann and Lindberg. The primary purpose of my paper is to examine how an autocratic regime can regress on the democratization scale.

This paper further draws from the associated literature on regime transitions to provide some useful insights into why backsliding could occur. Generally, two broad categories of causes have been postulated for the fall of authoritarian regimes: regime weakness,¹⁹ and opposition strength.²⁰ If regime weakness and opposition strength can explain how regimes transition from autocracies to more democratic forms of governance, then surely the converse would be true: the lack of internal reformers and opposition weakness could shed light on backsliding, as I argue is the case in Singapore.

Democratic Backsliding in Singapore: The 2011 and 2015 Elections, and Beyond

Amongst the most fascinating facets of the tiny city-state of Singapore's existence is the fact that in spite of being one of most remarkable economic stories of the modern world – the country is one of the “First-World” economies in Asia with impressive levels of education amongst its citizens, and high standards of living - it has been ruled on by one ruling party since its independence in 1965. As mentioned earlier, competitive authoritarian regimes are different from pure authoritarian ones as, in the former, elections are conducted, and there are genuine opportunities for the opposition to win seats in the legislature and challenge the incumbent's electoral dominance. However, these regimes cannot be considered democratic as numerous obstacles are instituted to prevent the opposition from having a level playing field: the media is skewed toward the ruling regime, elections are free but unfair since various electoral engineering measures are put in place to increase the barriers to entry for the opposition, draconian laws exist and are occasionally used against dissident activists and opposition members, *inter alia*.²¹ The PAP has managed to stay in power due to a calibrated array of strategies involving both co-optation and repression. Opposition leaders have in the past been victims of defamation suits that made them bankrupts; the media, though not fully controlled to the extent that it is not critical of the

state at all, tends to be more favourable toward the ruling party; trade unions have been co-opted by the PAP, as have been many prominent intellectuals and initial-critics; and numerous electoral devices – especially the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) -²² have been introduced to tilt elections in the ruling party’s favour.²³ But beyond institutional measures, the party has also been successful at maintaining ideological dominance over the citizenry, as most of the electorate has accepted PAP’s core ideologies - namely survival, multiracialism, meritocracy, pragmatism and secularism - as national imperatives.²⁴ The PAP’s extraordinary electoral appeal is demonstrated through successive electoral results, as evinced from Table 1.

Table 1

Year of Election	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1991	1997	2001	2006	2011	2015
% of valid votes for PAP	86.7	70.4	74.1	77.7	64.8	63.2	61	65	75.3	66.6	60.1	69.9

Source: Elections Department

This article has chosen to compare the aftermath of the 2011 and 2015 GEs to ascertain backsliding in Singapore. This is because the 2011 GE was a momentous occasion in the country’s electoral history; for the first time, the PAP lost a GRC, it received the lowest share of valid votes ever, and ground unhappiness was so significant that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had to issue a public apology during hustings for the government’s failures.²⁵ Following the “watershed” election of 2011, the PAP government adopted a different tone and promised an expansion of the political space. Initiating a national “Our Singapore” conversation, the government announced that it would solicit the views of Singaporeans on the problems that the nation was facing. In fact, government Ministers iterated that there were “no sacred cows”, giving the impression that Singaporeans need not self-censor, and that the government was willing to reconsider even the policies which it had previously staunchly held on to.²⁶ The opposition’s victories also heralded a new era of more robust

– by Singapore standards – parliamentary discussions. The government had to deal with the Workers’ Party (WP) in Parliament, who after the 2011 GE, boasted six elected parliamentarians. In 2013, between 4000-6000 Singaporeans gathered at Hong Lim Park, the designated Speakers’ Corner, to protest against plans to eventually increase the population to 6.9 million via immigration.²⁷ In the same year, WP gained one more seat in Parliament following a by-election in Punggol-East constituency, after the PAP Speaker of Parliament had to resign because of a sex scandal.²⁸ The presence of more opposition parliamentarians induced many observers to speak of a “new normal” in politics,²⁹ as Singapore was described as “authoritarian but newly competitive”.³⁰ Social media became an important site of contestation, as is the case in many countries with state-influenced media, and became the platform via which views critical of the government were freely espoused. More voices challenging the PAP appeared in online spaces, both formally – via the proliferation of anti-establishment websites such as States Times Review – and in the personal capacity of ordinary Singaporeans, as more citizens felt emboldened to write critical commentaries of the government on their personal Facebook pages. These factors caused much hope for optimism on the trajectory of Singapore’s democratization prospects.

In 2015, however, the “new normal” seemed further than ever after the results of the GE. Held in the year of the passing of Lee Kuan Yew – Singapore’s iconic founding Prime Minister credited with spearheading the country’s spectacular transformation into a first-world nation – the PAP resoundingly won and trounced the opposition. The WP retained 6 of its 7 seats, albeit by much thinner margins. More importantly, the PAP attained almost 70% of the popular vote. To be sure, Lee’s death contributed to the final results: the spontaneous outpouring of grief by Singaporeans at his passing, as evinced by the long queues and waiting times that citizens were willing to endure to pay their final respects to him,³¹ demonstrated just how much Singaporeans revered the man.³²

His death was not the only factor for PAP's victory, however. The PAP had rectified some of the earlier problems associated with housing, transport and immigration which caused its poor performance in GE 2011, and had also jumped on the social media bandwagon, rebranding itself as more approachable and in touch with the ground.³³ In addition, the softer touch it took, as described earlier, had a palpable effect on efforts to shed its image of being authoritarian and elitist.

Unsurprisingly, however, after GE 2015, its more familiar authoritarian style returned. The 70% share of the popular vote provided the party with sufficient political capital for it to spend.³⁴ It must be noted that according to the Economist's Democracy Index, Singapore's democracy score actually improved between 2011 to 2018, and other democratic indices such as Freedom House and V-Dem too either indicate increasing democratization or no regression for Singapore in the same time period, even though they all agree that Singapore is still only "partly free".³⁵ However, I argue that instead of democratizing, Singapore in fact backslid into more authoritarianism. A few pieces of evidence will be given to back this claim.³⁶

Firstly, after 2015, a few pieces of legislation were passed through and/or discussed which further constricted the political space. The Administration of Justice (Protection) Act was passed in 2016: under this new legislation, anyone who "scandalizes" the court by alleging that the court is not impartial, or who does an act which "poses a risk that public confidence in the administration of justice would be undermined." The Act explicitly states that "fair" criticisms of the judiciary would not be criminalized.³⁷ Not long after, prominent civil activist Jolovan Wham and member of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) John Tan were charged in court for contempt of court, for their social media posts which were deemed to have been unfair to the judicial system.³⁸ To be sure, it is not the intention of this article to assess whether passing the Administration of Justice (Protection) Act into law was justified; indeed, many cogent arguments were put forth by

the government in explicating the need for the Act. The point here is to indicate that such laws could inadvertently contract the political space as activists may self-censor themselves, since they may make the assessment that it is highly subjective if their criticisms of certain judicial matters could be classified as “fair”.

Another legislation which generated much discussion is the Protection against Online Falsehoods and Manipulation (POFMA) bill, which was passed in May 2019.³⁹ The move further endows the executive branch of government with the ability to censure its critics, if they are deemed to have purposely spread online falsehoods. In sum, the new piece of legislation will provide the government with even more ammunition that it already has, to go after its critics. In spite of opposition to the bill by academics, members of civil society and journalists, the legislation was still passed through. Since then, the law has also been invoked a few times, mostly on opposition members and critics of the state. In a way, POFMA is similar to the constitutional amendment on the Elected Presidency. The latter was made in 2017, when the PAP said that Singapore needed to have Presidents – who do not possess much executive power, but is a figurehead - from different racial groups, and to guarantee that minorities would be elected, the elections would be reserved for the Malays or Indians if no Malay or Indian respectively had been President for five terms. The amendment was immediately applied to the 2017 Presidential Election. Many expressed unhappiness at the amendment, with some arguing that it was simply a move to prevent Tan Cheng Bock – who had almost beaten the PAP-backed candidate in the 2011 Presidential Election – from contesting this time round.⁴⁰ Both the Reserved Presidency and POFMA were opposed by many Singaporeans – the former much more so than the latter – but the PAP went ahead with them anyway. Such policies or laws could perhaps be passed more smoothly when the PAP was in a stronger position. It is difficult to imagine both POFMA and the amendment to the Presidency

being passed in the wake of the 2011 elections. The broader point is that authoritarian or hybrid regimes are better able to implement harsh measures which may be politically advantageous, when they are in a stronger position to do so.

Secondly, apart from these new laws, more punitive actions have been taken against academics and activists who have been critical of the state. Professor Kishore Mahbubani, a longstanding ally of the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew's confidante, and Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), was the at the receiving end of some stinging criticisms by the Minister of Home Affairs and Law, K. Shanmugam, as well as other state-aligned prominent individuals, namely Ambassadors Bilahari Kausikan and Ong Yeng Kong. This was after Mahbubani had written an opinion piece in *The Straits Times* arguing that Singapore should behave like a small state, and that in the past, the presence of Lee Kuan Yew made Singapore more respected in the international scene in a way that small states are typically not. With Lee's passing, Mahbubani asserted that Singapore does not have the same standing anymore.⁴¹ Shanmugam, Kausikan and Ong took exception to Kishore's comments, with Kausikan calling them "muddled, mendacious and indeed dangerous."⁴² Mahbubani's colleague at LKYSPP, Donald Low, was similarly targeted by Minister Shanmugam after Low had misconstrued the Minister's comments on the legal system. Low posted three apologies on his personal Facebook page, with the last one coming about two weeks after the first. In it, Low mentioned:

"I have spent several days reflecting on my conduct, in putting up a commentary that was neither accurate nor honest. I attributed to him views the very opposite of what he held, and then criticised him in a sneering tone... To make things worse, my apology was self-exculpatory. I accept that my criticism of your views was untruthful, unfair and unsubstantiated. I have let the LKY School down. But above all I'm sorry for my original post; it was impulsive and reckless."⁴³

Both Mahbubani and Low subsequently left the LKYSPP a few months later.

Apart from these academics, activists have also run into some trouble. Leong Sze Hian, a prominent blogger, is currently contesting a defamation suit issued by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong against him. This is after Leong had shared an article on his Facebook page which alleged that Lee had assisted former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in money-laundering activities.⁴⁴ Activist Sangeetha Thanapal, who popularized the term Chinese Privilege, was issued a warning by the police for one of her Facebook posts on race calling Singapore a “terribly racist country”.⁴⁵ Jolovan Wham, a civil rights activist, was charged in court for organizing a public assembly without a permit and was subsequently fined \$3200.⁴⁶

These incidences show that, contrary to what was expected after 2011, democratization in Singapore did not take off, and civil liberties are still limited in a significant manner. More importantly, it further illustrates how low-level repression has intensified after 2015. The cumulative impact of these new pieces of legislation and the harsh treatment of activists and academics is the heightening of self-censorship, which is already a problem to begin with.⁴⁷ Such effects are undoubtedly relevant in Singapore’s context as well; it is doubtful that anyone can make a serious claim that these actions by the state do not contribute toward an amplified climate of fear.

One could very well make the argument that the changes after 2011 were cosmetic and nothing institutional was entrenched. In response, I would make two points. Firstly, discourses matter. Discourses affect people’s perceptions and expectations, and what they are willing to accept, and therefore cannot be dismissed. Secondly, even if that were true, what I am suggesting is that after 2015, there has definitely been a regression as far as democratic space is concerned, both in terms of discourse and institutions. Whether the changes after 2011 were cosmetic or substantive does not affect the thrust of my argument that since 2015, there has been backsliding.

This section has showed that the basic criteria of backsliding have clearly been met since 2015. There has been executive aggrandizement, passage of laws which could weaken opposition to the ruling party, and the curtailment of freedom of speech and press.

Conditions for Backsliding in Singapore

What then, are the conditions that could help explain democratic backsliding, or an increase in the authoritarian machinations of the state in Singapore? I postulate two main answers. This first is external: the absence of a strong and coherent opposition in the political scene. The second is internal: the lack, if not absence, of genuine reformers within the party who champion democratic norms.

Absence of Strong and Coherent Opposition

To be sure, it may be difficult to speak of opposition weakness in Singapore and it may be more accurate to speak of PAP's strength. After all, the ruling party has steered Singapore toward spectacular economic growth and has ensured high standards of living for Singaporeans. In addition, the party has instituted numerous obstacles for the opposition, impeding the latter's growth. Regime strength can be discerned through the number of seats and votes it has obtained, and the pervasiveness of its ideological discourse. Conversely, oppositional weakness can be seen from the minuscule amount of electoral seats it has in Parliament (6 of 89 as of May 2020), and the unpopularity of competing ideologies amongst Singaporeans.⁴⁸ In many ways, regime strength is inversely proportional with opposition weakness. However, the Malaysian experience can provide some clues as to why it is still worthwhile to talk about opposition weakness: in spite of similar institutional barriers, *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) managed to unseat the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government in 2018. BN relied on draconian laws, controlled the mainstream

media, utilized malapportionment and gerrymandering strategies, in addition to pointing toward its track record of providing economic success and social stability. Yet, unlike the PAP, BN's hegemony was gradually on the wane since 2008, culminating in its loss of power in 2018. BN's loss can at least partially be traced to the presence of a credible opposition: under the leadership of former BN leader and Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and other former government. This way, voters would be more assuaged in voting for the opposition: even though it had never been in power before, it still comprised individuals who had been in the upper echelons of government. The presence of eminent former cabinet members helped the opposition overcome the "credibility gap".⁴⁹ Moreover, the opposition was able to overcome deep-rooted ideological and personal differences. Mahathir's party, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Malaysian United Indigenous Party), which purported to champion the rights of Malays, was in a coalition with the secular and Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), the multiracial Malay-dominated Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR) and the moderate Islamist *Parti Amanah Negara* (National Trust Party). They held vastly differing ideological stances on numerous fundamental issues such as the position of Malays and Islam in the country. In addition, Mahathir's disagreements with individuals from the other parties are well-documented in Malaysian history. Many leaders of PKR, DAP and PAN had in the past been arrested by Mahathir. In spite of these evident ideological and personal chasms, these parties worked together to successfully defeat the BN government.⁵⁰ Of course, these ideological differences eventually came to the fore, resulting in the fall of PH government in early 2020, being replaced with the new *Perikatan Nasional* (National Alliance) which comprise some former members of the PH alliance and BN parties, but the fact that they were able to coalesce to overcome the BN government shows that these differences can indeed be overcome, with enough political will.

The opposition in Singapore is neither as strong nor as coherent. Before the 2020 General Election, only the Workers' Party (WP) had seats in Parliament (6 of 89 for elected members, with the other 83 belonging to the PAP). The other opposition parties are not even represented in parliament. While it is true that today, the opposition is stronger than it was before 2011, it is still nowhere near formidable enough to cause a serious dent in the PAP's rule. The inability of the opposition to penetrate the hegemony of the PAP can be attributed to a few factors. Firstly, unlike their counterparts in Malaysia, the opposition in Singapore does not comprise any major defectors from the ruling party. It is common for the PAP to use the trope that the opposition is an untried entity and therefore cannot be entrusted with the governance of the nation.⁵¹ The only way for the opposition to get around this conundrum is to have defectors from PAP who have had significant experience in government. It is no surprise to see that the opposition in Malaysia has always been most successful when it has had a former government senior leader in its midst. The same is not the case in Singapore. The opposition has not been able to secure the support of a former PAP leader, with the exception of Tan Cheng Bock, which will be discussed in a while. Hence, the opposition is still viewed as an untried entity in many quarters. Eugene Tan, a political observer and academic from Singapore Management University, remarked that the PAP's comprehensive victory in GE2015 was due to voters' concerns about having an opposition which has not been in power before as the government, and therefore, Singaporeans went with the "tried-and-tested brand."⁵²

Secondly, the opposition parties in Singapore have largely been unable to form significant formal pre-election coalitions. Ideological and personal differences have stood in the way of genuine cooperation between the various parties. Research has shown that ideological differences do provide some form of hindrance to coalition-building.⁵³ WP has indicated no interest in working

with the other opposition parties, particularly SDP. WP is careful to project itself as a responsible opposition party and does not differ radically from the PAP in terms of its core ideologies, while SDP does challenge the ruling party's fundamental tenets of governance.⁵⁴ Apart from these ideological differences, personal issues have prevented opposition cohesion. Chee Soon Juan, the controversial leader of SDP, is alleged to have ousted his mentor, Chiam See Tong – a veteran opposition politician who is respected by even the PAP leaders – from the SDP, leading to the latter forming his own opposition party.⁵⁵

Yet, in spite of significant ideological and personality differences, it must be remembered that in the case of Malaysia, those differences were even starker. The animosity between Chiam and Chee, or Chee and members of the Workers' Party, cannot be compared whatsoever to the hostility Anwar Ibrahim and Lim Kit Siang had for Mahathir Mohamad. However different WP's and SDP's ideologies are, they are not as far apart as the DAP and PPBM on the ideological spectrum. Ergo, ideological and personal differences do not necessarily have to hamper opposition cooperation and coordination. Thus, the failure of the opposition parties in Singapore to mount a concerted challenge against the PAP cannot be attributed to their inherent differences. Politics is, after all, the art of the possible; if it is possible for Mahathir to work with Anwar Ibrahim to unseat BN, it is definitely within the realm of possibility for the WP to cooperate with the SDP.

It is important to emphasize that this essay does not make a normative judgment on what should be the approach by the opposition. Indeed, one can make the postulation that the WP is being extremely rational in rejecting SDP's overtures for coalescing; the SDP does not have enough traction amongst the electorate at this point in time for it to substantially add value to the WP's chances of winning. Nonetheless, the point here is that while the opposition is disunited, it becomes

harder for them to challenge the PAP's rule in a more sustained manner, in the way that their Malaysian counterparts had done.

Another crucial factor explaining the weakness of the opposition is the risk-averse electorate. The nature of the electorate, which is not only primarily concerned with material welfare and not individual liberties, but also, unwilling to take a risk with the opposition, proves to be a stumbling block. Again, comparisons with Malaysia are useful. In Malaysia too, draconian measures – perhaps even more so – were used against dissidents and/or civil society activists at times. Yet, civil society continued to persevere and challenge the state's excesses. In Singapore, however, there is no such appetite for greater individual freedoms in Singapore. Even in 2011, when the PAP suffered an electoral setback, the primary issues of concern raised by Singaporeans pertained to housing, transport and immigration.⁵⁶ The PAP lost votes then because of failures in matters of material welfare, not because Singaporeans had subscribed to more liberal ideas on democracy. The excessive focus on material factors, and the concomitant lack of regard for liberal democratic norms, is testament to the PAP's success in asserting ideological hegemony over its populace. The ideology of survival,⁵⁷ which iterates that Singapore is under perpetual external and internal threat (external, because of its larger Malay neighbours and small size in the international system; internal, because of its multi-racial population and thus, its susceptibility to racial strife),⁵⁸ has caused Singaporeans to be depoliticized enough. Oliver and Ostwald document how the PAP has been extremely successful in shaping voter preferences.⁵⁹ This is something which the BN perhaps lacked; its ideology of Malay-led multiracialism and consociationalism was not as coherent and logical to voters as the siege mentality propagated by the PAP.⁶⁰

There is a conundrum which opposition parties face. Pre-electoral coalitions are more likely when oppositional victories are more likely.⁶¹ The Malaysian case perhaps epitomizes this observation

the most. Disparate parties coalesced when the chances of winning increased.⁶² That means that the lower the chances of unseating the ruling party, the less likely it is for opposition parties to come together. Yet, if they do not cooperate, the probability of winning in elections decreases. Nevertheless, opposition parties can benefit from the formation of pre-electoral coalitions, by providing “credible signals” to the electorate in terms of their commitment toward governing, and in projecting strength.⁶³

The weak opposition has allowed the ruling party to essentially formulate the rules of the game, without facing enough resistance. Unlike in other countries, the opposition has not been able to promulgate alternative discourses which hurt the core of PAP hegemony. In Malaysia, for instance, a strong opposition was able to challenge BN’s ideological hegemony through putting forth an alternative vision to the country, by having enough people within the opposition who had experience in ministerial positions, and by having a proper oppositional coalition. The opposition in Singapore has never been able to articulate such a vision. The lack of a strong opposition has further contributed to the image which many Singaporeans have of the opposition, which is that they are not necessary, and are there just to fulfil their personal goals. For the risk-averse electorate, as long as material welfare is maintained, it does not really matter if measures which limit individual liberty such as POFMA are introduced. As such, these have cleared the path for the PAP to implement undemocratic measures, when it feels the time is right.

Lack/Absence of Genuine Reformers from Within

To be sure, while the impetus for democratization usually comes from external sources – declining popularity, strong opposition *inter alia* – it can also come from within.⁶⁴ I argue that the PAP lacks genuine reformers who would push for democratization from within, precisely because of this homogeneity. This uniformity is the consequence of three main factors: the PAP’s party structure,

the sources of PAP's talent pool, and a political culture that does not reward deviance, or even diversity.

Other works have emphasized the importance of the PAP's party structure in ensuring ideological conformity.⁶⁵ The party structure resembles a cadre party, where cadres are selected by party leaders, and in turn, vote for the leadership at party elections. Moreover, there is no contest for the Secretary-General position, the number one post in the party. The combination of these two conditions ensures that the party is less likely to be divided along ideological lines; leaders would be more inclined to bringing in cadres who have similar ideological leanings, and the absence of a leadership contest makes sure that the party is more unified. In addition, the Prime Minister, in essence, chooses his successor, even if he may decide to base his selection on the acceptance of his colleagues.⁶⁶ There is thus very little incentive for an aspiring Prime Ministerial candidate to deviate from established party norms and ideas. No doubt, PAP leaders are not all monolithic. Yet, while they may differ on certain policy positions, they rarely ever differ from the core tenets of PAP's governance. This is to be expected, precisely because of the party structure. While one could say that it is unrealistic to expect reformers to come from within a party which has ruled for over 50 years, examples elsewhere show otherwise. The former ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – the major component party in the BN coalition - too had been in power for over five decades before it lost in 2018, but it had in the past faced multiple major splits.⁶⁷ The mass party structure made this possible: ordinary Malays can sign up to join UMNO, and there are contests for leadership positions. This made it possible for reformers – or at least, people who portrayed themselves as such – to rise through the party ranks. Anwar Ibrahim would be one example. The point here is that longevity of rule does not necessarily mean that contestations may

not come from within the party. What matters more than length of time in power is the party structure.

A closely-related second factor is the source of PAP's talent pool. After Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Ghok Tong, Lee Hsien Loong and Heng Swee Keat – who has been earmarked to take over the reins from Hsien Loong as the fourth Prime Minister – all come from the civil service, as do many ministers. This is not an unimportant point: being in the bureaucracy entails a certain skills set which may differ from the private sector. While the private sector may reward innovation, creativity and critical thinking more, the civil service incentivizes efficiency, adhering closely Standards of Procedure (SOP), and following orders. A common criticism of the Singapore civil service is that it is too rigid and civil servants do not exercise discretion in carrying their duties.⁶⁸ While this rigidity ensures fairness in the execution of policies, and results in efficient outcomes, at the same time, it does not encourage innovative thought, or even a willingness to challenge others. It can thus be a concern that many of the senior leaders in the PAP come from the civil service in Singapore. Additionally, the focus that the country has put on the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields has been well-documented. It is worth noting that even within the PAP, most of the senior figures come from either STEM, Economics, or Law backgrounds. It is rare to see those with a background in the Social Sciences rising to leadership positions within the party. This point, though not often discussed, should not be ignored. It is my contention that the absence of social scientists in senior positions in the PAP is another factor that prevents the rise of reformers from within: those from humanities and social sciences backgrounds tend to be more liberal and display greater concern toward freedom and individual liberties,⁶⁹ and having them amidst a party's ranks would increase the likelihood of issues associated with democratization being discussed at the highest echelons of power. Furthermore, most of the PAP

leadership come from elite schools in Singapore: Raffles Institution/Junior College and Hwa Chong Institution. To illustrate this, one can look at the composition the 16 4G (Fourth Generation) leaders:⁷⁰ of the 15 who were educated in Singapore (Dr Janil Puthuchery went to school in Malaysia), only three did not go to these institutions.⁷¹ Barr documents the disproportionate amount of PAP leaders over the years who attended these schools and go on to be part of “elite networks”.⁷² The lack of diversity amongst the PAP elites is palpable on multiple fronts.

Finally, the political culture in Singapore is one which does not reward, or even encourage, non-conformity. In general, Singaporeans have been taught since a young age that too much democracy is not a valuable thing for a small country like Singapore, which needs to ‘survive’ above all else.⁷³ As such, a depoliticized political culture has successfully been created by the ruling party. From time to time, those who go beyond the bounds of what is considered acceptable criticisms are met with the harsh ‘stick’ of the law, deterring others from challenging the state outright. A consequence of this depoliticized populace is that when the ruling party recruits new members, they are not bringing in new people with radically different ideas about the direction the country is taking. Rather, they are enlisting members who have pretty much accepted the core tenets of the ruling party, and whose differences with the ruling party, if any, are more trivial than fundamental. In the absence of vibrant debates about the merits and disadvantages of various political philosophies, it is expected that the bulk of new members who join the ruling party would not particularly go out of their way to champion democratic norms. The resulting consequence would then be a side-lining of the importance of democracy, and the need checks and balances, in favour of “what works”, and the lack of outrage or resistance to any moves by the ruling party which could undermine democracy.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to highlight the conditions under which backsliding is more likely to occur. The emphasis here is that 1) backsliding can happen even in non-democratic countries and 2) it can take place without economic or military crises. The case of Singapore has been used to demonstrate that the absence of a strong opposition, coupled with the lack of political will from within the ruling party, provide the background conditions under which backsliding can occur. What else can we discern from the Singapore case and apply to the broader literature? Essentially, the introduction of the notion of conditions under which backsliding is more plausible can be a useful conceptual tool, in ascertaining, not the causes, but the underlying and surrounding factors regarding a particular phenomenon. Furthermore, the comparisons between Singapore and Malaysia highlight a few salient points. First, even between competitive authoritarian regimes, some are more authoritarian than others.⁷⁴ Second, just because a party has been in power for many years, it does not necessarily mean that all institutions would work invariably in its favour. Some institutions are more conducive for authoritarianism, such as the cadre party structure. Third, the interactions between structure and culture must be investigated. It has been argued earlier that the risk-averse political culture in Singapore is ultimately a result of the enactment of certain institutions.

Recently, there has been some developments in the political scene. Dr Tan Cheng Bock, a former PAP parliamentarian, formed a new opposition party, as he hopes to challenge the PAP in the upcoming GE. Some opposition activists have been buoyed by this development and have likened Cheng Bock's defection to Mahathir's in Malaysia. However, a few things need to be put in perspective. Firstly, Tan Cheng Bock is not Mahathir Mohamad: the latter was the Prime Minister of Malaysia for 22 years and spearheaded the country's economic development, whereas Cheng Bock was merely a backbencher in his party. Secondly, Malaysia's political culture has always

been more vibrant than Singapore's: a conversation with the average Malaysian is more likely to veer into political territory than one with a Singaporean. Thirdly, BN suffered a huge credibility crisis with its former leader Najib Razak's involvement in a corruption scandal, whereas the PAP does not face a similar situation. It thus remains to be seen whether Tan's foray into oppositional politics would be a momentous turning point for the trajectory of democratic development in the country's history, or if it would simply be a footnote to the story of PAP hegemony.

End-Notes:

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- ¹ Mechkova, Luhmann, and Lindberg, “How Much Democratic Backsliding?”, 162.
- ² Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”; Dresden and Howard, “Authoritarian Backsliding and the Concentration of Political Power”; Waldner and Lust, “Unwelcome Change”; Gandhi, “The Institutional Roots of Democratic Backsliding”.
- ³ Dresden and Howard, “Authoritarian Backsliding and the Concentration of Political Power,” 1124.
- ⁴ Han Lang, “Will Dr Tan Cheng Bock play the role of Dr Mahathir in Singapore Politics?”
- ⁵ Dresden and Howard, “Authoritarian Backsliding and the Concentration of Political Power.”
- ⁶ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”, 10-11.
- ⁷ Gandhi, “The Institutional Roots of Democratic Backsliding”, e11.
- ⁸ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.
- ⁹ Tansel, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey”.
- ¹⁰ Esen and Gumuscu, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey”.
- ¹¹ Dresden and Howard, “Authoritarian Backsliding and the Concentration of Political Power.”
- ¹² Gibler, “Outside-In”.
- ¹³ Gibler and Randazzo, “Testing the Effects of Independent Judiciaries”.
- ¹⁴ Levitsky and Way, “The Myth of Democratic Recession”.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 50.
- ¹⁶ Luhmann and Lindberg, “A third wave of autocratization is here”, 1096.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 1100.
- ¹⁸ Waldner and Lust, “Unwelcome Change”, 95.
- ¹⁹ O’ Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*; Geddes, “What do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?”; Eisenstadt, “Eddies in the Third Wave”; Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”; Pant, “Economic Crisis and Regime Change.”
- ²⁰ Gandhi and Reuter, “The Incentives for Pre-Electoral Coalitions”; Ong and Tim, “Singapore’s 2011 General Elections and Beyond”.
- ²¹ Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
- ²² The GRC is akin to the Party Block Vote System (PBV), where candidates compete in teams of 4-6 members – of which at least one must be an ethnic minority - in a multi-member electoral district. The GRC disadvantages the smaller opposition parties as they do not have the resources to compete with the PAP in these large wards.
- ²³ Mutalib, “Constitutional-Electoral Reforms and Politics in Singapore”; George, “Consolidating Authoritarian Rule”; Morgenbesser, “The Autocratic Mandate”.
- ²⁴ Mauzy and Milne, *Singapore Politics under the People’s Action Party*; Chua, *Liberalism Disavowed*; Abdullah, “Selective History and Hegemony-Making.”
- ²⁵ Tan, “Singapore in 2011”.
- ²⁶ Wong and Sim, “No ‘sacred cows’ in review of policies.”
- ²⁷ “4000 turn up at Speakers’ Corner for population White Paper protest.”
- ²⁸ Wong, “Michael Palmer resigns: MPs shocked by announcement.”
- ²⁹ Tan, “Singapore in 2011”.
- ³⁰ Ortmann, “Singapore: Authoritarian but Newly Competitive”.
- ³¹ Tham, “Queues of people willing to pay last respects to Mr Lee Kuan Yew continue to swell.”
- ³² At times, people had to wait in queue for 7 hours.
- ³³ “PM Lee Hsien Loong on using social media: some of his more popular posts.” *The Straits Times*.
- ³⁴ GE 2015 was noteworthy as it was held after Lee Kuan Yew passed away. Lee’s death most definitely contributed to the resounding win for the PAP. However, the focus of this paper is not on the reasons for PAP’s victory in 2015, but rather, what happened afterwards.
- ³⁵ I have been informed, however, this regression will be reflected in Freedom House’s upcoming scores.

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- ³⁶ Indeed, most, if not all of the political observers I have spoken to, agree with the claim of backsliding since 2015.
- ³⁷ Singapore Statutes Online.
- ³⁸ Selina Lum, “Activist Jolovan Wham and SDP’s John Tan found guilty of contempt of court”.
- ³⁹ Lee, “Bill on deliberate online falsehoods could be tabled by first half of 2019: Edwin Tong.”
- ⁴⁰ Osman and Waikar, “The People’s Action Party and the Singapore Presidency in 2017.”
- ⁴¹ Kishore Mahbubani, “Qatar: Big lessons from a small country,” *The Straits Times*, 1 July 2017.
- ⁴² Mohamad Salleh, Nur Asyiqin, and Chew Hui Min, “Minister Shanmugam, diplomats Bilahari and Ong Yeng Kong say Prof Mahbubani’s view of Singapore’s foreign policy ‘flawed’.”
- ⁴³ “My first apology was insincere’, Donald Low to Shanmugam.”
- ⁴⁴ Lam, Lydia. “PM Lee, Leong Sze Hian to file statements for defamation hearing in February.”
- ⁴⁵ Kathleen F., “Activist Sangeetha Thanapal receives stern warning from authorities after calling Singapore a ‘terribly racist country’.”
- ⁴⁶ Tan, Tam Mei, “Activist Jolovan Wham fined \$3200 for organising illegal assembly and refusing to sign police statement.”
- ⁴⁷ George, *Freedom from the Press*.
- ⁴⁸ Abdullah, “Selective History and Hegemony-Making.”
- ⁴⁹ Ong and Tim, “‘Singapore’s 2011 General Elections and Beyond’.”
- ⁵⁰ Ostwald and Oliver, “Four arenas.”
- ⁵¹ Abdullah, “Assessing Party Structures.”
- ⁵² “Voters opt for ‘tried and tested’.”
- ⁵³ Golder, “Pre-electoral coalition formation”; Kellam, “Why Pre-Electoral Coalitions in Presidential Systems?”.
- ⁵⁴ Abdullah, “Selective History.”
- ⁵⁵ Mutalib, *Parties and Politics*.
- ⁵⁶ Tan, “Singapore in 2011”.
- ⁵⁷ Abdullah, “Selective History”; Loh, “The Disturbance and Endurance of Norms in ASEAN.”
- ⁵⁸ Liu and Ricks, “Coalitions and Language Politics”, 494.
- ⁵⁹ Oliver and Ostwald, “Explaining Elections in 2018.”
- ⁶⁰ Abdullah, “Bringing Ideology In.”
- ⁶¹ Wahman, “Offices and Policies.”
- ⁶² Ufen, “Opposition in Transition”.
- ⁶³ Tillman, “Pre-Electoral Coalitions and Voter Turnout”.
- ⁶⁴ Slater, “Strong-State Democratization.”
- ⁶⁵ Abdullah, “Assessing Party Structures”.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Case, “Comparative Malaysian Leadership”; Abbott, “Vanquishing Banquo’s ghost”.
- ⁶⁸ Haque, “Governance and Bureaucracy in Singapore”.
- ⁶⁹ Cofnas, Carl and Woodley, “Does Activism in Social Science Explain Conservatives’ Distrust of Scientists?”.
- ⁷⁰ These individuals identified themselves as the new generation of PAP leaders in an open letter on choosing the next Prime Minister. See Ng, “16 ‘younger ministers’ sign statement.”
- ⁷¹ The three are Lawrence Wong, Masagos Zulkifli, and S. Iswaran.
- ⁷² Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*.
- ⁷³ Abdullah, “Selective History”.
- ⁷⁴ Abdullah, “Assessing Party Structures”.

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